

Cultural Psychology of Education 12

Shuangshuang Xu
Giuseppina Marsico *Editors*

Social Ecology of a Chinese Kindergarten

Where Culture Grows

 Springer

Cultural Psychology of Education

Volume 12

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Editors

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Preface of the Series Editor

Cultural Psychology of Schooling Beyond the Silk Road

This book titled *Where Culture Grows: Social Ecology of a Chinese Kindergarten* is innovative in many ways. First, in its content and, then, in its format. It is an in depth diving in the Shanghai kindergarten system (which is the most advanced educational proposal in the early childhood education of the entire China) made by a group of young researcher coming from Luxembourg. Aside of the apparently bizarre Luxembourg-China connection, the volume documented the efficacy of a new methodological tool called Research Tandems that has been tested for the first time in the occasion of the research visit of Luxembourgish young scholars to Shanghai in 2018.

The Research tandem consisted in paring one insider (Chinese young scholar) with an outsider (the Luxembourg partner) to make observations in the Chinese educational context.

The simple premise is that the difference in the cultural understanding helps both the outsider—for the evident reason of being guided into the culturally situated comprehension of local meanings—and the insider who may be forced to dissect the take-for-grant set of meanings in her own culture.

This simple, but powerful research device has been very effective at the point that the research tandems committed themselves in joint writings. The results is this book, which is an insightful gallery of the cultural aspects of the early childhood education in China.

This book nicely complements the reading of some of the previous volumes in the series like: *Educational contexts and borders through a cultural lens*—Looking inside. Viewing outside written by Marsico, Dazzani, Rsitum and Bastos (2015) or the more recent Hviid and Märtsin, work titled *Culture in Education and Education in Culture. Tensioned Dialogues and Creative Constructions* (2019).

These books try—in a way or in another- to illuminate the critical dimensions of the educational context in the East and West of the globe. School, in fact, is at the crossroad in many societies. Schools work both as catalytic elements—sometimes

propulsive, sometimes inhibitory—of specific social processes (Toomela & Valsiner, 2010) and as homeostatic function devoted to preserving the *status-quo* of society. The school institution in modern societies has an important role in the construction of the ideals of society and its organization. In some European and Latin America countries, education is meant to promote human development and citizenship and to provide qualified training for getting a work in the competitive and ever-changing job market. However, what kind of human is expected to form through the work of schooling? The type of human based on conformation/formatting? What citizenship is about when exists a social inequality in accessing the basic rights of people? What is the meaning of work for society that inherits the separation between manual and intellectual work due to its slave tradition as in the Brazilian context?

These elements are linked to a notion of the human being historically and culturally situated. Some socio-political circumstances (as dictatorships) did not favor the emergence of educational context in which dialogue and the manifestation of subjectivities were present (Freire, 1970). In order to face with this situation, new educational initiatives have emerged in different places in the world to envision new forms of schooling in which innovation and recognition of cultural and individual needs are better integrated. Educational innovations have been designed and implemented with the purpose of supporting participation within the school as a guiding principle for the educational practices to guarantee the academic knowledge while supporting human development.

The IBEF Vision

Based on the Cultural Psychology of Education framework (Marsico, 2018; Valsiner, 2014) we intend to produce a robust theoretical understanding of the educational practices in different socio-cultural contexts in order to promote new sustainable paradigms in education. This has been the main goal that led to establish the International Centre of Excellence on Innovative Learning, Teaching Environments and Practices “IBEF—Ideas for the Basic Education of the Future”. IBEF is the utopia that comes through and is a milestone of the international programme promoted within the framework of Cultural Psychology of Education. This International Centre of Excellence is located at East China Normal University (Shanghai, China), that coordinates a large network of Universities all over the world (Aalborg University, DK; Oslo University, Norway, University of Salerno, Italy; Federal University of Bahia, Brazil and Luxembourg University among the others). IBEF builds upon already existing national and international excellence and joins researchers in the field of Cultural Psychology of Education. It is a high visibility of collaboration that seeks to have an international impact on research and society. The Centre of Excellence “Ideas for the Basic Education of the Future “on Innovative Learning, Teaching Environments and Practices, aims at looking beyond

the current trends in basic education and at identifying the most innovative and edge ideas, to study and understand how to implement them on the long term. The Centre studies and disseminates innovative learning and teaching environments and practices for the future and has already an agenda of wide-ranging networking actions. One of the best result so far is the Research Tandems experience here so nicely documented.

Salerno, Italy
April 2020

Giuseppina Marsico

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Chapter 1

Research Tandems in International Collaboration: Luxembourg–China



Shuangshuang Xu and Giuseppina Marsico

This book comes from a long-lasting concern in constructing a cultural psychology of education by integrating international research efforts from a large variety of social and cultural background (Marsico, 2017; Valsiner, 2009). In the last years, the IBEF-Center of Ideas for the Basic Education of the Future (International Network on Innovative Learning, Teaching Environments and Practices)¹ has been established. It is based in Shanghai and has universities and scholars from Luxembourg, Italy, Brazil, Denmark, Norway and China in the network. This book, as the first book publication born in the network, is mainly contributed by young scholars and master students from East China Normal University and University of Luxembourg's joint work during their stay in a Chinese kindergarten in Shanghai for one and half months in the summer of 2018. In that summer, one Chinese student and one Luxembourg student paired with each other as a research tandem² to conduct a research internship together. Research tandem in one specific local setting is the biggest characteristic of this project. The research tandem, as innovative research device, is simple. The idea is to form a couple of one *insider* (a Chinese student) with a *foreigner* (the Luxembourg psychology student) on the basis of common, previously explored research interests. In this process, both sides are exposed to the experience of “defamiliarization”:

¹<https://www.ed.ecnu.edu.cn/en/?p=2901>; <https://sites.google.com/unisa.it/gris/ibef?authuser=0>.

²The research tandem idea comes from prof. Luca Tateo (Oslo University, Norway) who first designed it as one of the main methodological tools within the IBEF.

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Luxembourg students are faced with totally different cultural and educational context, while Chinese students need to respond to their doubts and curiosity. Discussion and negotiation between students from the two backgrounds have continued throughout the whole research period. Both sides need to re-examine their cultural beliefs and premises, which have been taken for granted in their daily practice. This encountering has provided an opportunity for the “*epoche*” of phenomenology, which makes it possible to analyze deeply the conscious states of young children.

One Kindergarten as a Window of a Bigger World

Educational institutions are never pure or simplified “ivory tower” isolated from other parts and connections of the society. Aimed at preparing young citizens for the future, educational institutions are always future-oriented and have its own image of “imagined definition of the child to-be” (Marsico & Tateo, 2018, p. 7). This image is socially constructed, and it evolves historically along other aspects of vivid social practices. In this sense, kindergarten can be regarded as a window of a much bigger social, cultural and historical world, in which human beings inhabit, develop and transcend themselves constantly. By asking and answering the question of “what young children should/should not learn in/outside kindergarten,” tension, uncertainty and ambivalence of complex social dynamics and forces can be revealed.

From this perspective, entering into one specific Shanghai kindergarten is the same as entering into the complicated Chinese social reality, in which long historical tradition and strong motivation for a “modernized” future are fused together and continuously evolve itself into a vibrant and intricate landscape. Meanings and values consciously or unconsciously promoted and conducted in the kindergarten are semiotic devices and they mediate children and educator’s daily behaviors and activities, who are constantly navigating among different social institutions and crossing the border of kindergarten. Values and norms can be inconsistent or even ambivalent and compete with each other in the field of educational institution (Tateo, 2019). Social discourse containing these values and norms is generated in people’s daily social interaction and has its deep root in people’s real social practice. As a result of social practice, it gradually achieves its firm and clear expression in the field of ideology. At the same time, ideological concepts, terms and theories are imported into and appropriated by social discoursing practices. In this bidirectional processes, phenomena and practices are conceptualized by dual concepts of “Western-Chinese,” “New-Old,” “Scientific-Folk” or “Advanced-Behind”.

The process of capitalism and globalization has dragged every country into the same game, and meanwhile it has ended the possibility of isolated development, which means it is impossible to advance development while keeping door closed. Societies have to learn to identify themselves and explore their unique developmental paths in the painful process of encountering otherness. Shanghai, as one of the biggest cities in China, has gone through huge and rapid social and economic changes since the “Reform and opening” policy in 1979. If we focus on the social

reality constituting and bringing about unique needs, challenges and opportunities for preschool education, following but not exhausted social aspects should be referred to: (1) The process of urbanization has brought big population into the city, which makes kindergarten classes with large scales an unavoidable reality for kindergarten teachers and young children (He & Ji, 2020); (2) Families with two working parents and insufficiency of the social welfare system on pension and nursery have produced a new style of family structure: four grandparents–two parents—one child (Meng & Heuschkel, 2020). When entering into kindergarten, the child, who is used to communicating and interacting with adults, has to adapt themselves into a collective environment and learn to deal with peers of same age. (3) New middle class rises and requests for different symbols and life styles to strengthen their class identity. Class anxiety is rendered and upgraded under the operation of capitalism. As a result, preschool education has become a new commercial battle. Western educational models are imported both as cultural and commercial products into Chinese market for Chinese parents to choose as different possibilities for “better education”; (4) Education functions always as an effective way for class mobility in Chinese society, which makes education anxiety one of the biggest anxieties nowadays. On one side, kindergarten as institutions for preschool education has to receive and accept pressure from formal education, which makes the orientation of “preparation for school” stronger and stronger. On the other side, kindergartens should find out their own unique characteristics to identify, label and present themselves to the public in the commercial market. These two aspects have produced different degrees of integration between learning orientation and unique characteristics adopted by kindergartens. It can be seen that values and norms can be quite ambiguous and even ambivalent in one specific kindergarten.

Research Tandem as a Platform to Cultivate Research Intuition

This book documented the first implementation (within the framework of Cultural Psychology of Education) of the research tandem as a methodological innovation. It is based on the assumption that diversity matters and it can be the key point for a meaningful cultural-based research. Young students from different cultural and academic backgrounds (students majoring in psychology and preschool education from East China Normal University and University of Luxembourg) were coupled into four pairs of research partners to work together in a kindergarten.³ The kindergarten we chose to enter was affiliated to the university. Children attending this kindergarten

³They were constantly supervised by Chinese and International scholars over the period of their joint work. A special thank goes to prof. He Min (ECNU, Shanghai), Xiao-wen Li (ECNU, Shanghai), Yunfei Ji (ECNU, Shanghai), Jaan Valsiner (Aalborg University and Luxembourg University), George Main (Luxembourg University) and Isabelle Albert (Luxembourg University) for their constant scaffolding work.

came from the neighborhood, and many had their parent working in the university. Because of the summer vacation, all the regular activities were stopped, and there was only a small mix-aged class on run when the project started. Parents who were busy working and did not have much time taking care of their children at home could choose to send their children to this summer class. It was more flexible and relaxing both in the activity form and content in the summer class compared to regular classes during the semesters. There were no coherent teaching activities, as teachers took turns to look after the class and thus had big freedom in deciding how they want to organize the class. Usually, more structured collective teaching would be planned in the morning and the afternoons were for children's free play after they get up from nap. The four pairs of research tandem also took turns to enter into the class, with two pairs a day, to make sure that children will not be disturbed too much with the appearance of the researchers in the classroom.

The project had a shared focus on the process of children's socialization in the kindergarten. Under the same focus, research tandems developed different angles to enter into the field: Different themes explored under different research methods. It is worth mentioning that, although Luxembourg students have already made a research proposal before coming to Shanghai, it was still very difficult and even painful to some extent to decide which aspect was worthy and realistic to work on in this specific kindergarten during their short stay in Shanghai: summer class without routine activities, decorations and activity corners removed in preparation for new semester and language barriers when trying to communicate with children and teachers. Luxembourg students had to understand and deal with that specific children group in the specific kindergarten in the specific period, and no existing theories about child development could directly help them to find out a good research question to complete their research internship. They had to rely on their curiosity and sensitivity. Communication within the research tandem became crucial to relate to the educational field.

It was in the communication process between the research tandem that the ongoing phenomena were constructed and reconstructed as a social fact with certain terms, concepts and values. Chinese and Luxembourg students shared some common conceptual systems. For example, when seeing a teacher talking to a child, they would all label the phenomena as "teacher-child interaction" and put it into that certain category for later analysis. Under that shared category came different interpretations and underlying beliefs of Chinese and Luxembourg students: What is good/not good? What should/should not be done? It was often the case that both sides were caught up into a deeper thinking process after proposing a question and trying to answer that question. The setting of research tandem facilitates the students to closely examine the specific context along with its deep cultural and historical root to have a better understanding of the unfamiliar and defamiliar phenomenon. The ability of being sensitive and reflexive is crucial to conduct researches in cultural psychology, and research tandem provides a promising platform for young researchers to sharpen their professional intuitions.

As Tateo, Español, Kullasepp, Marsico, and Palang (2018) have pointed out, a polyphonic epistemology can be a productive methodology for psychology research,

as gazes from multiple researchers on the research field can multiply the process of meaning making of our research object. In the mutual gazes, the experiencing and meaning-making researchers are actually being in a web of relationships, which mediate and coordinate their gazing. This systemic epistemological approach is especially essential for researchers to enter into a familiar/unfamiliar research site. As in the mutual site, objects are in the continuous movement of coming near and coming far, being strange and being as usual.

Tateo (2020) also emphasizes the importance of adopting a standing point on cultural psychology of education rather than cross-cultural psychology of education to really facilitate the power of systemic epistemological approach. In his analysis, the cross-cultural perspective is an adding of monological gaze on the research field, which can lead to comparative analysis, but can hardly go deep into the semiotic mediating level of the culture on human development. This book adopts the perspective of cultural psychology of semiotic mediation, which conceptualizes culture as belonging to the relating process between person and environment. From this perspective, individuals and social worlds mutually constitute each other by two processes of internalization and externalization (Valsiner, 2007). This theoretical framework differs from cross-cultural psychology, as in cross-cultural psychology, culture is conceptualized as belonging to persons, and persons are representative of certain cultural groups, which makes persons more or less passive. Distinguishing of these two theoretical frames is especially important in the area of kindergarten research, as it also concerns how we conceptualized children. Are children a whiteboard for culture to paint itself on? Or can children be active agents who are always in the process of creatively choosing and constructing guiding clues from culture? By adopting the perspective of cultural psychology of education, we are firmly keeping our research interest on the interactive border zone between the active child and its cultural guiding setting, which emphasizes on a dynamic analysis of the bidirectional process of internalization and externalization.

Brief Introduction of the Structure of the Book

The book covers different aspects of children's process of socialization and tries to understand children's developmental dynamics by integrating both perspectives of kindergarten institution and children's subjective experience. Chapter 2 provides the readers with insightful synthesis of the current debate on the mains educational purposes in the Eastern and Western cultural settings. Chapter 3 gives an overview about Chinese kindergarten, which has characteristics of large-scale classes and a strong orientation toward learning and school preparation. It also presents kindergartens' struggling to respect more about the child perspective and children's free play. Chapters 4–8 are co-contributed by research tandems. Chapter 4 examines the implicit "speaking" of various kinds of explicit cultural objects decorated in the